

Remarks by Madam Josefina Pitra Diakité
Ambassador Extraordinary and Plenipotentiary of the
Republic of Angola to the United States of America
at

Hearing on Elections in Angola

*House Subcommittee on Africa,
Global Human Rights and International Operations*

20 July 2006

Mr. Chairman Smith

Members of the Subcommittee

U.S. and Angolan Officials present

Good Afternoon,

It is a pleasure to be here this afternoon at the invitation of Chairman Smith to discuss the electoral process in Angola.

The Government of Angola appreciates the interest expressed by the U.S. Congress and the U.S. Administration in this post-war milestone in Angolan history. We are fully aware of the importance to Angolan citizens -- and those encouraging the strengthening of democratic processes in Africa -- of the process of preparing for elections, as well as the actual event that will take place on election day.

Angola held its first elections in 1992 during a period of relative calm in our decades-long civil conflict. Regrettably, the country returned to war shortly thereafter and it was not until peace was restored definitively in 2002 that we as a nation could even begin to contemplate the next general elections.

As we began to put together a plan that would lead us to national elections, we became painfully aware of a number of serious obstacles lying in our path. As we assessed these obstacles, President José Eduardo dos Santos was clear in his guidance that it was essential to prepare well, regardless of the time required, in order to ensure free, fair, and inclusive elections. He said that the people of Angola deserved that.

There have been questions regarding the lengthy planning and preparation timeline. Let me state that Government succeeded in reintegrating one hundred thousand former Unita-soldiers and more than three thousand families. Also, three hundred and sixty thousand, of the four hundred and fifty thousand Angolan refugees, were repatriated. This represents 92% of the total Angolan refugees who sought refuge abroad.

Ninety nine projects, designed to benefit close to seventy six thousand former-soldiers, are being implemented.

Mr. Chairman,

The destruction of many public records is one other big challenge for us. The war caused considerable destruction of communication infrastructure, including roads, bridges, railways, health and education centers. The holding of elections is closely linked to the circulation of people and goods under absolute security conditions. With this aim, and in order to ensure the resettlement of the population, my Government plans to rehabilitate seventy two thousand Kilometers of roads and recover one thousand and three hundred bridges, from the previously existing six thousand and three hundred. The Government started rehabilitating the entire national railway network.

This will greatly improve access to significant parts of the country.

The issue of landmines has been the Government's top priority in the post-conflict era, since they hinder the movement of people across the country. As proof of its commitment, an executive commission for de-mining was established and organizations such as CNIDAH have assisted in the process.

An important electoral legislation package was passed by the Angolan National Assembly, which includes:

- The Electoral Law
- The Law on Political Parties
- The Political Party Funding Law
- The Electoral Registration Law
- The Electoral Observer Law.

The issues I have just outlined illustrate my Government's belief that the mistakes made in 1992 elections must not be repeated and lessons must be learned.

The lessons learned have led us to implement technical visits to and from electoral officials in other countries, due to limited experience of election officials throughout the country; training programs are under implementation. Hundreds of electoral officials required by province and town, are being trained.

The Angolan government has learned of the negative associations of elections with the tragic return to war in 1992.

Government is aware of this concern, and that is why it is currently monitoring election awareness and civic education programs, as well as providing accurate information with the assistance of local traditional and religious authorities and other social partners.

Another important point that has often been overlooked is the lack of party representation in many parts of the country. So, political parties have been advised to establish presence in various parts of the country.

Mr. Chairman,

While elections play a crucial role in the country's democratic process, good planning for ballot security and accountability is essential so that possible disputes and misunderstandings can be avoided.

Let me affirm that, Angola has made great progress politically, economically and socially, since the Luena Accords signed in 2002 returned the country to the roadmap begun at Bicesse in 1991 and refined by the Lusaka Protocol in 1994. I have referred specifically to election-related areas of progress, but there is much more. The growth of the economy and the reconstruction efforts are success stories in their own right.

However, we recognize that we still have much to accomplish before Angolan citizens go to the polls. The registration process is scheduled to begin shortly and will take approximately six months to complete. The purchase of electronic balloting equipment is on track and the training for its utilization has already begun.

I must stress that, progress achieved to date has been facilitated by several international organizations that have maintained a presence in the country, and have worked closely with political parties. We hope that assistance provided to these parties be extended to improving the Angolan government's institutional capacity to respond adequately to the current challenges.

Let me conclude by saying that, the Government of Angola is committed to national elections as an important step in the strengthening of democracy, but also recognizes the wisdom in moving with deliberate and measured speed to an election date that will ensure the complete confidence of the Angolan people in the final results -- and reflect positively on their present and future government.

I would be happy to respond to questions that you may have.

Thank you.